

## Genealogy in Early British Census - 1086 to 1841

*We thought that census records started in 1841 but what about the dozens of earlier censuses that will help us find our families?*

Censuses in one form or another have been taken for centuries throughout the British Isles, commencing with the Domesday Survey in 1086. Some censuses covered the entire country, some a single county, some one of a county's Hundreds or similar sub-divisions, and some only one or two parishes or parts of parishes. Many of these censuses or population listings can be used by family historians to discover data on their ancestors. Some details in these listings are surprisingly more comprehensive than found in the nineteenth century census returns with which researchers are often more familiar.

Monarchs and governments, the Established Church, Lords of Manors, associations and individuals all compiled lists of lone people and families to check who had paid dues, taxes and subscriptions, who was capable of fighting or undertaking other work when needed, who was loyal to their causes and attending their functions - and to be able to plan a sensible infrastructure - who lived and worked where, and in which trade or profession.

From the thirteenth to the nineteenth century, taxes were levied on land, property, fireplaces and windows, even hairpowder. There were also loyalty lists, militia lists and muster rolls, lists of voters, church rate payers, communicants and papists, and commercial and private directories were published for interest and financial reward. Several lists were mere enumerations, some named heads of households, but others appear to have the names and other details of everyone in the community. Contrary to popular belief, a number of the census returns for 1801, 1811, 1821 and 1831 show names and other details of individuals. Many of the above lists have been transcribed, indexed and published.

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## **Migration: Internal, Immigration and Emigration - Tracing That Elusive Ancestor**

*Why, how and when did your family move?  
Where did your family really come from? Where did they go to?*

Individuals and families who moved from one place to another are a constant source of irritation to family history researchers who are often focused on tracking their ancestors back generation by generation. Yet without migration many of us would not be “here” today. Tracing that elusive ancestor who moved should be regarded as an opportunity to discover more about our ancestors’ lives, rather than an annoyance in the quest to reach further back into the past. To discover from where, or to where, an ancestor migrated, it is helpful to consider possible reasons for the migration. Was it, for example, a matter of choice such as looking for a spouse, or was the move imposed by a particular circumstance, individual or authority, or was it a political party or religious belief that influenced the move?

In impoverished conditions, individuals and families sought betterment in terms of food, work and housing, none of which might have been available in the immediate locality. Improved conditions could have been found a few parishes away, or perhaps in another county in a distant part of the country, or maybe secured only by travelling far away from the homeland. Drastic changes in the weather could have caused successive poor harvests either locally or nationally, so forcing people to move away from their family homes. Too few craftsmen with a particular skill in an area could have drawn specialists from other places to fill a specific need such as constructing a cathedral, a canal or a railway. Conversely, too many local individuals might be interested in one trade – if, for example, six sons of a blacksmith all wished to follow their father’s skill, then four or five of them would have had to move away from home to find sufficient work.

The distances that individuals were prepared, or forced, to move was usually greater than for entire families, yet there are examples of large families, sometimes an entire community, moving hundreds or thousands of miles from their former homes. Some people financed their own migration, others were sponsored by individuals, organizations and local and national governments. In some cases stringent conditions and regulations were attached to the sponsorship, in other cases generous rewards. Some movements of migrants and the means, whether by road, canal, rail or ship, were closely monitored and recorded, others went apparently unnoticed. However, some diligent research may uncover some useful records of migrants and passengers, occasionally indexed and available for researchers today in a variety of sources.

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## **Your Ancestors, Population and Birth Control - Contraception Delicately Delineated**

*Was family or community size planned by past generations to influence life, work and love?*

Large families can be useful in a rural community, and were so, particularly before the mechanization of agricultural activities. Many pairs of hands were essential in contributing towards tilling the land, sowing the seed, reaping the harvest and processing the results. Children were cheap sources of labour in scaring crows from ripening crops and minding animals, whether beasts of burden or sources of meat, hides and wool. But excessively large families, with many hungry mouths to feed, could be a drain on the resources of a local community. Accordingly, a balance could be sought between enough individuals to provide sustenance yet not too many that cannot be cared for. Such a balance was not always considered, yet alone controlled, in many communities.

From a national point of view, callous monarchs or governments may encourage parents to have large families, particularly sons, to be able to join their armies to attack, or perhaps defend themselves against, others, knowing that many of the fighters are likely to be killed. Settlers in new lands may wish to extend their communities to ward off incursions from indigenous inhabitants, or simply to populate and cultivate their newly acquired territories.

In the past, however, high or low numbers of sons and daughters around the house, home and farm, were not an indication of how many children had been conceived. Miscarriages, still births and infant mortality were extremely common as a result of poor nutrition, disease and insanitary living conditions, much brought about by a lack of understanding of health and hygiene. Yet, under close scrutiny, it can be seen that some family and community sizes were being limited, not by wars or pestilence or natural causes, but deliberately by couples practicing some means of contraception or by authorities imposing birth control. Some techniques were based on irrational superstitions, others on genuine science, probably not fully understood at the time, but often employed in today's preparations and technologies.

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